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A Sound Divided:

The Battles of Musical Space in Austin, Texas

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A Sound Divided:

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by

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Report

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Dedication

For my mom and dad,

who encouraged me to make both music and noise.

A Sound Divided:

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Todd M. Thompson, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

SUPERVISOR: Michael Kackman

Austin is the self-proclaimed "Live Music Capital of the World," and its commitment to the practice of musical performance has created a unique environment for musicians and audiences. In particular, this paper focuses on the history of music in public places in Austin. This creative identity has helped encourage growth that creates stress on cultural and social relations. The conflict over amplified music is one front where this opposition plays out. Currently, the Austin noise ordinance is a decibel-based, quantifiable measurement, but everyone involved must make a greater effort to communicate and compromise in the social sphere. To cultivate a thriving live music scene, a strong commitment from venues, musicians, residents, and city hall is necessary.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations…….……vi

Foreword…….……1

Introduction…….……6

Chapter One: Mapping the Landscape…….……..26

Chapter Two: A Collision of Compatible Uses…….....48

Conclusion: Listening……64

Bibliography…….……..67

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Alejandro Escovedo and his band at a 2010 *ACL* broadcast…….35

Foreword

This paper is the culmination of my two and a half years at the University of Texas, and as importantly, living in the city of Austin. For me to differentiate between these two spaces is a near impossibility, as my motivations for relocating were as much for one as for the other, and my immersion into both was simultaneous.

I moved here with my wife and young son, more impulse than well-crafted life-plan, facing middle-age and searching for a new vector. I had no focus for my research, just a lifetime of media production and a strong love of playing and producing music. I moved from Miami, Florida, my childhood home, a city that has very little sense of history or community; where concern for the past is scrubbed from the rocky soil with waves of callous development, desperate immigrants, shallow tourists, and violent, cleansing storms. History can find little purchase under such conditions, and the society that is created is correspondingly callous, desperate, shallow and violent.

I flew to Austin with my girlfriend (later my wife) as tourists in September of 2002. The excuse for our visit was the inaugural Austin City Limits Music Festival, named after the venerable PBS live music television program, conjuring up visions of an intimate, songwriter-based concert, albeit in a city park. We also had a strong desire to experience this city, despite having no personal connection to any people here. This single trip created an image in my head that would define Austin to me for years to come, and ultimately lead to my relocating here.

Stepping off the plane for the first time, we were awed by the sight and sound of a live country band in the airport; cowboy boots, pearl buttons on the shirts and at least one big hat. We saw signage proclaiming Austin the "Live Music Capital of the World." My only comparable experiences were the steel drum bands that will occasionally greet you in the customs area of a couple Bahamian airports. We passed on renting a car, deciding we would walk and use public transportation to get around; I remember a strong desire to listen, smell, and see this city as only a pedestrian could. We went to Stubb's where we watched a sold-out show at a rustic-looking amphitheater that had been built on a river embankment, where seemingly ancient oak trees provided a loose canopy to frame the unique space. The singer of Cowboy Mouth said something like, "We love coming to Austin. Too bad it's in the middle of Texas." There were both cheers and jeers to his underhanded compliment, but it stuck with me. We walked along Sixth Street, only because we felt obligated to experience it, and were impressed with its sensory spectacle, with the din of literally dozens of bands from dozens of bars mixing outside in the sticky late summer air, yet couldn't leave fast enough after hearing the numbing sameness of classic rock and Stevie Ray Vaughan covers that each bar assaulted us with. It was exhilarating and overwhelming at the same time. Our days were spent at the festival in Zilker Park, weaving our way through a homogenous looking mass of music fans, impressed that, even with the oppressive heat, long lines and the ubiquitous beer drinking, it was a cheerful, well behaved crowd. We left sunburned and with ears ringing, but madly in love with the weirdness of the city.

We flew home with a couple of cowboy hats and a free "Keep Austin Weird" bumper sticker from Waterloo Records and returned for the fest every year until 2008, when I moved here for the Media Studies program at UT and the chance to live in a town that encouraged music and creative expression in public spaces. This report is an attempt to examine both this place and the role of music in creating it.

A couple more relevant notes about me. Since I have moved to Austin, I have also used this as an opportunity to participate in the local music scene, playing and singing in a half dozen local bands, some as a regular member, other times as a "hired gun" for a specific gig. I have played some great stages, recorded in some impressive studios, and spent many long nights at the Music Labs rehearsal space(s) surrounded by the chaotic din of dozens of other local bands. I have been cut off in mid-song by a bar manager at 10:30 on a weeknight, when the noise ordinance shuts down outdoor stages. I have emotions surrounding the struggle of the musicians and music fans here, but my attempt is to channel those emotions into a more passionate, informed report on the state of the situation, remaining objective despite these personal opinions.

The other relevant data point is that, during my time here, through the magic of love and science, I have watched the birth of my second son. I write this not to evoke sympathy for the lack of sleep this implies (because it does), but to introduce my own sensitivity to noise, which will be a major topic of this report. A screaming baby cannot be ignored. He hails his parent directly, and most other people within earshot. His cry evokes annoyed looks at restaurants, occasional martial strife, and ultimately, a resolution

of selfless nurturing and quiet reflection. A solution is found, and life can continue in relative peace.

Prologue

I'd like to open with a moment from 1978.[1] It was few months after the first (and last) US tour of the Sex Pistols, that had included a date in San Antonio. A small club near the UT campus named Raul's had started booking punk bands.

> Gradually these [punk] nights became the central event for a growing crowd made up of Inner Sanctum [Record Store] customers, communications students, writers for the *Daily Texan* (with several individuals filling all three of these roles), gays, lesbians, and alienated musicians, in a self-defined celebration of marginalization that eventually made sense to the Chicano management of the bar.[2]

A band made up of mostly UT RTF students had formed over that summer, after having witnessed the spectacle of the Sex Pistols up close. They were called The Huns and their first show at Raul's is a neat encapsulation of the tensions reflected by (and caused by) live music in general in Austin.

The small club was packed with a crowd knowledgeable on the practices of a punk rock performance, complete with ripped shirts, black make-up, Nazi regalia, and

[1] September 19, 1978, coincidentally exactly 26 years to the day of my first trip to Austin.
[2] Shank, p. 104

"the almost ritualized display of antagonism between the band and the audience."[3] During the Huns' performance, the drumkit was torn apart. A full trashcan was dumped onto the stage. A City of Austin policeman entered the raucous scene with the justification of a noise complaint and challenged the singer in mid-song ("Eat Death Scum"). When the singer leaned over and kissed the officer on the lips, he was handcuffed and a near riot broke out, including the dramatic revealing of two undercover officers in the crowd and the subsequent smashing of one of their radios by the guitar player with a wild instrument swing. Guadalupe Street was closed down, six people were arrested (most of them RTF students) and the simulated violence that plays out in various ways on stages throughout time and space, was brought to life in its fully tangible, political reality.

> When you come out there in that dark, you make that magic. You pull something that doesn't exist out of the air. It doesn't exist until - on any given night - when you're just standing there in front of your audience - nothing exists in that space until you go, 'One. Two. Three. Four. Vroom.' Then you and the audience together manifest an entire world. An entire set of values. An entire way of thinking about your life and the world around you. And an entire set of possibilities. That can never be taken away.[4]

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[3] Ibid, p. 106.
[4] Bruce Springsteen, quoted in *The Promise - The Making of* Darkness on the Edge of Town, 2010.

Introduction

Austin is a city of contrasts. Geographically, it straddles the Balcones Escarpment, a fault line that separates the Texas Hill Country to the west from the flat agricultural plains to the east. Metaphorically, it is the border between the Western Frontier and the Old South.[5] Politically, it is both the seat of government and the beacon for counter culture. Musically, it formed its reputation in the 1970's when the world of both the singing cowboy and the psychedelic youth became embodied in the performances of Willie Nelson, among others, and the "Cosmic Cowboy" trend that they inspired.

These contrasts create inherent tensions. Nowhere is this more apparent than the battle over live music going on in Austin today.[6] For a city that officially calls itself "The Live Music Capital of the World," there is a surprising amount of acrimony between musicians and venue owners on one side, and institutions of authority on the other. The sight of uniformed police officers patrolling neighborhoods with sound-level meters puts this opposition into a physical, visual space for us to examine the tension between music and power, between the anarchy of the carnival and the regulation of urban modernity.

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[5] Menconi, p. 21.

[6] Quite literally. I just got an email informing me my gig tonight at the Mean-Eyed Cat was cancelled due to an "expired permit."

Music is the perfect vehicle to examine these relationships. It has the ability to cross boundaries, both physical and cultural. This gives it the power to both diffuse and create the tensions within a culture. It transcends language, borders, and time. It is both a commodity and a practice. It represents both power and resistance; individuality and cooperation. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, one of the seminal texts on the emerging field of sound studies, Jacques Attali writes:

> Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding. Today no theorizing accomplished through language or mathematics can suffice any longer; it is incapable of accounting for what is essential in time – the qualitative and the fluid, threats and violence.[…] It is thus necessary to imagine radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities. Music, the organization of noise, is one such form. It reflects the manufacture of society; it constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society. *An instrument of understanding, it prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge.*[7]

Music inevitably leads us to a discussion of its greater body, sound. Its physical properties such as propagation, echo, rhythm, and distortion provide rich metaphors for analyzing the social and political behaviors of people. It has been the symbol both of power (thunder, the church bell, the cannon) and progress (the blacksmith,

[7] Attali, p. 4 (italics original)

industrialization, the amplifier) and often both simultaneously. It is a marker for claiming a space, for defining a neighborhood or other geographic region. In the other seminal text of sound studies, *The Soundscape: the Tuning of the World*[8], R. Murray Schafer explains:

> In the territorial calls of birds we encounter the genesis of acoustic space […]. The definition of space by acoustic means is much more ancient than the establishment of property lines and fences; and as private property becomes increasingly threatened in the modern world, it may be that principles regulating the complex network of overlapping and interpenetrating acoustic spaces as observed by birds and animals will again have greater significance for the human community also.[9]

The modern history of Austin is told through its history of music. The artists and venues and alternative newspapers all leave an archaeological record that transcends their superficial entertainment value, exposing a narrative of growth and resistance, and a struggle to build a structure around such dynamic contrasts. This struggle to control the definition of this space is my fascination here.

[8] In addition to being the one book cited in nearly every text I reviewed for this report, it is also cited in the Wikipedia heading "Sound culture" described as: "the first contribution in sound studies."
[9] Schafer, p. 33.

Overview

We will start by defining the landscape, the map of Austin as written by the bands and venues and the municipal codes that structure them. This delimited space of the city leads to smaller defined spaces, some with roofs, some under the common air of the public. Some are officially sanctioned, some are in open defiance to the controlling power. By examining these physical spaces we often see the greater social struggle in a more comprehendible frame. Allowing ourselves to move around nimbly between locations in both space and time, we can stitch together a more complete impression of this landscape. Like music itself, these structures are dynamic and intangible, and no matter how long they resonate, they eventually fade into the historical record.

Next we will look a little deeper at the primary discourse surrounding music in Austin today: the noise ordinance. Like many contemporary US cities, Austin has tried to channel its growth towards its center, redeveloping its downtown with modern, high-density residences in what used to be a primarily commercial neighborhood. It is also, simultaneously, promoting itself as the "Live Music Capital of the World," primarily as a tool to attract creative jobs and workers. Owing to the uncontainable nature of sound, it is easy to see how there would be conflict between the growing urban population and the amplified volume of modern music. The past couple of decades have seen the local government grapple with this tension most visibly in the form of quantifying the problem by defining sound as an amount of decibels to be measured and limited. Whether or not this is an efficient method of enforcement will be one of my concerns.

By examining the nexus of live music and power, I hope to better understand the motivations behind the decisions of authority as it structures the landscape. How do the practices of music and permission define what, and who, the public is? How is live music defined in Austin, and what spaces are part of that definition? How do these conflicts over music and noise represent larger conflicts over "quality of life" and "sense of place"?

Literature Review

> The association of Noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist, and more recently to the broadcaster and the aviator. The important thing to realize is this: to have the Sacred Noise is not merely to make the biggest noise; rather, it is a matter of having the authority to make it without censure. Wherever Noise is granted immunity from human intervention, there will be found a seat of power.[10]

R. Murray Schafer articulated a unique perspective for an audible impression of the world in 1977. In its title alone, *The Soundscape*[11], Schafer establishes the physical nature of sound and the space it creates and delimits; and proceeds chronologically from

[10] Schafer, p. 76.
[11] In its first publishing, it was called simply *The Tuning of the World*. Upon its reprinting in 1993, it was retitled *The Soundscape: the Tuning of the World* presumably to reflect the notoriety of the neologism he had popularized.

the prehistoric to relate civilization and culture to the sounds heard and then made by humankind. Like sound itself, the book is a curious hybrid of the poetic and the technical. As a composer of experimental music as well as a scholar, Schafer approaches his subject with the passion of a native informant, but is clear that music is only one piece of the world of sound. He tells us that in earlier civilization, the loudest noises were those of power: thunder (the domain of the gods), the church bell (a single God as channeled through man), the cannon, even the rooster. Music was part of spring ritual that united the people in a common cause to harness the power of nature. Schafer condemns the din of the Industrial Revolution and our rising noise floor, seeing music as both a reflection of these changes and a method to counter them. He sees government as the arena for enacting noise abatement policies for lowering the noise threshold, so that we may once again return to a quieter time.

He acknowledges that *noise*, that he ultimately defines as "unwanted sound," is a subjective term.

> One man's music may be another man's noise. But it holds out the possibility that in a given society there should be more agreement than disagreement as to which sounds constitute unwanted interruptions. 'To disturb the public' then means to disturb a significant portion of the public, and it is in this manner that traditional legislation usually deals with noise problems.[12]

[12] Ibid, p. 183.

He reviews both the qualitative (what the consensus views as "unwanted") and quantitative (setting an acoustic level – measured by a decibel meter as in Austin) ways a government may define noise, and declares both to be useful in taming the urban soundscape. He contrasts various geographic regions and the type of noise they complain about, providing us with a unique framework for defining specific cultures. Jamaica (of the 1970's, keep in mind) had no attitude concerning machine sounds or air traffic. Johannesburg (1972) complained most about animal and bird noise. Chicago (1971) complained most about air conditioners; construction was second place. Ultimately, his thesis is that noise is to be considered in context with mostly qualitative criteria, which demands respect for and conversation with one's neighbors.

Focusing on his titular subject, the village bells of 19th century France, Alain Corbin narrows his object of study but continues on Schafer's path of examining the definition of space and power through the use of sound waves. "A history of representation of space and the social imagination can no longer afford to neglect materials pertaining to auditory perception."[13] By limiting his focus to the bells of pre-industrial Europe (and following through to World War I) Corbin sets up the power struggle between the Church and the rise of the municipal government. Analyzing municipal records, he claims more was spent on bells than relieving poverty or promoting education. And not only did they serve to define a community (the louder the bell, the wider the claimed territory of the parish), but they also served as an invisible signifier of the omnipresence of the Church, in a very direct connection to God (also invisible and

[13] Corbin, p. xii.

omnipresent.) The bells "played a part in the marking that served to constitute a territory, and that was indissociable from the notion of surveillance."[14] He even finds stories of priests climbing to the top of the towers with a spyglass to surveil their parishioners. He describes "bitter" fights between the nascent municipal governments and the Church's control over the bells, leading to local laws in the 1880's giving an extra key for the tower to the mayor, to allow dual control over this early form of both broadcasting and supervision.[15] The numerous fights over locks and keys described by Corbin show the growing ambiguity of the signs in question, and are an interesting front between these two sources of power. By tracing the evolving meanings of the bell over time – in the late 19th century it came to represent fires, funerals, baptisms, arrival of the taxman, revolt, bread riots, executions, and more; as the Church lost power to the city government, as the signaling of morning, quitting time and prayer time ceded the temporal to the mechanical quantification of time, and messages were sent by a more efficient postal system – it became an empty signifier, devoid of any meaning but the sound itself. And the

[14] Ibid, p. 210.

[15] An interesting site of asserting power, I am becoming fascinated by the history of Austin as told through its highest structures. The capitol, built in 1888, was the tallest building in Austin at 308 feet. The UT Tower, built with 17 huge bells in 1936 (since expanded) was built to 307 feet, in apparent deference to the power of the state, yet asserting a virtual equivalence. Lastly (and somewhat anecdotally) the infamous and unique "moonlight towers" of Austin, were part of a national trend in the late 1880's, of which our towers are apparently the last standing. The Eiffel Tower was completed in 1889. The consistency of this late 19th century time frame is interesting, suggesting more investigation as to the causes for this urge to claim a presence in the space above the urban landscape.

belltower, once a "monument to modernity" evolved into a quaint sign of nothing but emotion and nostalgia.[16]

Interestingly, Corbin is a historian specializing in 19th century France, with no musical background, nor does he cite Schafer anywhere in this book. Apparently concerned for the secondary status of the other senses in history, he has also written *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*. I consider the dethroning of our visual bias in both history and media studies an fundamental aspect of my research.

Noise: The Political Economy of Music is a significant text that connects music with the field of political economy. It was written by Jacques Attali, another French scholar, but also an economist concerned with disparities of power and poverty, and founder and president of the microfinance non-profit PlaNet Finance. His basic thesis is that music is simply the structuring of noise, which is, in a sense, what government is also: a structuring of the "noise" of the individual voices and motivations of a population. Here "noise" isn't painted with the same negative connotations as with Schafer's brush, merely a name for all collective sound, natural and human-made, intentional and random. Music is a way of talking about, thinking about the structures we are trying to study. It is not a metaphor, or rather, it is not *only* a metaphor, but a valid object of study to examine the effects of power and methods and places of resistance. "Music makes mutations

[16] Corbin, p. 210.

audible. It obliges us to invent categories and new dynamics to regenerate social theory, which has become crystallized, entrapped."[17]

I have a problematic path to walk for this paper: I need to discuss music as an object at the center of the power struggle between authority and its subjects, but I can also use it as a metaphor to illuminate the bigger picture of struggle within a modern society. Attali reassures:

> The risk of wandering off into poetics may appear great, since music has an essential metaphorical dimension: "For a genuine poet, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but a vicarious image that he actually beholds in place of a concept"*
>
> Yet music is a credible metaphor of the real. It is neither an autonomous activity nor an automatic indicator of the economic infrastructure. It is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society. Undoubtedly, music is a play of mirrors in which every activity is reflected, defined, recorded, and distorted. If we look at one mirror, we see only an image of another. But at times a complex mirror game yields a vision that is rich, because unexpected and prophetic.[18]

[17] Attali, p. 4.
[18] Ibid, p. 5. * The quote within is Friedrich Neitzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Vintage 1967. p. 63.

Here Attali, formerly an economic advisor to François Mitterand's socialist government in France, breaks from classical Marxist thought. His elevation of music as a "herald" of the changes in society (a great aural metaphor), more fluid than perhaps other forms of culture that make up the superstructure of Marx, gives the superstructure agency over the economic base, which seems a reversal of Marx, where the base determines the superstructure. Indeed, Fredric Jameson, writing the foreword in *Noise,* relishes "the possibility of a superstructure to *anticipate* historical developments, to foreshadow new social formations in a prophetic and annuncitory way."[19] This is the power of studying noise and music in the dynamic situation of Austin today. There is a sense that the drama of the power struggle is both *represented* by the music, and also being *determined* by the music. This is further down the continuum from Marx to Raymond Williams, who criticized Marxism's "determining base and the determined superstructure,"[20] claiming that these two central elements were less static *things* than *processes*, involved in an interdependent relationship. By further expanding the agency of culture, Attali has taken this idea even further, allowing the dynamics of music, and even the give-and-take of live musicians, to inform his cultural theories. This agency of music is central to my research.

Karin Bijsterveld, a Dutch social historian, writes about early 20th century noise and the campaigns to control it. In both her book and separate chapter reviewed here, she traces the origins of "noise" as a term for "unwanted sound" to the Middle Ages. It also appears as part of the technical discourse of telephone engineers as a description of line

[19] Fredric Jameson, forward to Attali, p. xi. Italics original.
[20] Williams, p. 31.

interference at the beginning of the century. This early 20th century discourse introduced technical quantification of the problem to the (informed) public. Measuring sound was made a scientific reality, with tools for separating and amplifying levels of different frequencies.

This brings to mind the Shannon-Weaver model from the early days of most media studies programs, where this engineering logic is also applied to general semantics and communication. Noise is considered something that is added to the original signal between its transmission and its reception. By leaving any agency out of the receiver, this model is generally rejected by media scholars today. By narrowly defining noise as "added" or "interference," we limit what kind of discourses can occur about sound disagreements. Remembering that a single "transmission" can be simultaneously both message and noise, depending on how we define the "receiver," is ample evidence that studying the acoustic is essential to media studies. This reminds us of the danger of relying too much on physical models as frameworks for understanding more semantic or cultural structures.

The earliest organization Bijsterveld finds for noise abatement is the German Anti-Noise Group (*Antilarm-Verein*) of 1908. Made up of over 1,000 scholars, physicians and lawyers, its motto was, "Tranquility is distinguished." Their bourgeois make-up had them tarred as "elitist" in the press, often portrayed as "non-masculine hysterics." [21] The fact that they didn't address industrial noise, focusing instead on traffic noise, hampered

[21] Bijsterveld, p. 173.

alliances with labor unions, inspiring opponents to counter their campaign with another association: that between noise sensitivity and femininity.

The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want by Garret Keizer is interesting as a current non-academic look at the nexus between sound and noise. Most interesting for me is the context into which it was published: it was one of three books on noise or silence published within a month of each other in May 2010.[22] That the topic is a relevant part of our cultural discourse isn't a surprise, but it is encouraging to me. Keizer discounts the revolutionary aspects of sound espoused by Attali, but does provide us with a pragmatic look at current noise disputes. He addresses the "unwanted sound" definition of noise, praising its "progressive implications," suggesting we have other options than passively accepting our fate. "It implies a world that can be changed."[23] He concludes that social engagement and compromise are the ultimate solutions:

> [I]n a nation that began by a declaration of independence from a king, noise raises the question of whether we are to be a country without kings or a country in which everyone wants to be king. Noise disputes are often particular expressions of that fundamental question. Kings rarely walk quietly through the world.[24]

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[22] "Noises Off," Ted Conover. *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, May 28, 2010. The other two books are *Zero Decibels* by George Michelson Foy and *In Pursuit of Silence* by George Prochnik. Of the three, the review recommended Keizer's text as the most serious and full of "cultural analysis." Adding to his cultural relevance: he was a featured guest on *The Colbert Report*.
[23] Keizer, p. 42.
[24] Ibid, p. 250.

Sonic geography, part of cultural geography, offers an interesting perspective on the importance of sound, and essential to us in our mapping of Austin. In his paper, David Matless studies a rural wetland region in England, and the public disputes over what constitutes "acceptable" noise. These debates point out "the contested values, the precarious balances, the battles for beauty and peace and excitement that make up a place."[25] Although asserting the importance of the soundscape, and citing both Schafer and Corbin, Matless does pull his punches in his introduction, fearing those writing exclusively about sound are perhaps unfairly maligning the visual.

> To mark out the sound is not to argue that it can be granted autonomy, or that it provides some privileged arena for social and cultural enquiry. While arguments for the study of sound and music as going 'beyond' the visual have been important in establishing a field for legitimate study, geographical studies of the sonic and/or the musical may not benefit from presentation as an advance on supposedly conventional or restricted visual approaches.[26]

Despite this lack of faith in the proper weight of the audible, he maps out an interesting conflict between the natural and the man-made. By equating the defining of a space by its soundscape as valid a method of study as by its landscape, he stakes a claim for the audible in a field not overtly concerned with music or politics, but geography. Who gets

[25] Matless, p. 747.
[26] Ibid, p. 746.

to decide what is the proper soundtrack to a region, especially if the region is as defined by its voice as by its visual appearance? As the sonic effects of the people attempting to appreciate the natural beauty of this space (boat and car motors, radios, laughter) are charted out over time, what is defined as *acceptable* has changed. Matless examines the discourse from public policy records to relevant fiction and personal diaries, where definitions of *acceptable* are as numerous as the sources cited. The battlefield of the audible creates the need for authority to be created:

> Sound helps legitimize forms of cultural authority which deem it problematic. Shouts on the riverbank or songs on a boat can hardly be prevented, but their all too unpredictable occurrence sustains responses seeking a quiet order of things.[27]

Deeper into the theory of sonic geography we go with Brandon LaBelle's *Acoustic Territories*, a recently published exploration of sonic culture within the urban setting. Broadly speaking, LaBelle is less critical of the urban soundscape than most of our other subjects here, more curious than judgmental. He is a sound artist and a professor at the Bergen National Academy of the Arts in Norway, as well as a former professional drummer in rock and roll bands, which is important in that he seems to have a passion for sound that is essential in convincing others about its ability to define a space. "The temporal and evanescent nature of sound imparts great flexibility, and

[27] Ibid, p. 753.

uncertainty, to the stability of space."[28] The urban space is the perfect arena to study the omnipresence and irrepressibility of sound. Unlike the wide open, unreflecting rural landscape of 19th-century France of the village bells, this topography suits the interactions of sound better as a laboratory to study their dynamics and resonances.

> Noise brings with it the expressiveness of freedom, particularly when located on the street, in plain view, and within public space; it may feature as a communicational link by supporting the passing of often difficult or challenging messages; and in its unboundedness it both fulfills and problematizes the sociality of architectural spaces by granting it dynamic movement and temporal energy.[29]

Acoustic territorialization becomes a political process. It creates a social space that is also a space for regulation, the same way Matless' Eden adapted to the sounds of modernity.

> Sound explicitly brings bodies together. It forces us to come out, in lyrical, antagonistic, and beautiful ways, creating connective moments and deepening the sense for both the present and the distant, the real and the mediated.[30]

Like so much of my selected literature, LaBelle understands that history is told in many ways, but the auditory history is harder to record due to its evanescence. This is all the

[28] LaBelle, p. xxi.
[29] Ibid, p. xxiii.
[30] Ibid, p. xxiv.

more reason to study it in the present, to examine our cities and culture through the prism of sound and sonic geography, so as to preserve a representation of it in some form (albeit visually, in the written word).

> Though the historical may be examined through textual record, accounts, written archives, and documents, it is equally an audible echo taking shape through material forms, cultural markings, and geographic flows.[31]

This leads us from a discussion on the relevance of noise, to a more specific look at music. The most salient point across most of the previous pages is that sound reflects change instantaneously, perhaps even causing change in the political economy. This is its power. If music is the structuring of noise, then *live* music would seem to be the most efficient way to study these changes: it has the potential to be as spontaneous and dynamic as a conversation or a riot. The interaction between the performer and the public is immediate and explicit. To look at Austin, we must look at what makes, or what *can make*, live music so unique, especially compared to recorded music, especially considering the fluidity and improvisation built into the genre loosely called rock & roll. Austin deemed itself the "Live Music Capital of the World" in 1991 justified by the fact that it had more live music venues per capita than any other city. There are many cities with a larger economy of *recorded* music - New York, Nashville, and Los Angeles being the most obvious examples - but the abundance of live venues is a unique situation in Austin. New Orleans would be another great object of study, with its identity also

[31] Ibid, p. 107.

founded on live music, only rooted more in the jazz/rock & roll intersection than the country/rock & roll one we see in Austin. Lest I paint any of this with a utopian brush, it is important to remember that live music today – especially rock & roll – is a form that relies on (and is defined by) electronic amplification, as well as the commodification of the space of performance.

Barry Shank, now a professor of American Studies with a strong interest in music and popular culture, was a working musician in Austin in the 1980's when he got his BA at UT. His examination of the music scene here in *Dissonant Identities* is engaging in its sensuousness. He has seen the audiences from the rickety wooden stage, sticky with beer. He has lived the fluidity of a long musical jam and dodged bottles in the spontaneity of a bar fight. His approach to the Austin scene is to frame it within the study of identity and political economy. He outlines the inherent contradiction at the genesis of the modern music scene here: between the 1960's archetype of the itinerant, anti-commercial folk singer and the commodity-driven venue known as the honky-tonk that gave him or her a space to perform.

> At the very moment when they were singing the pleasures of immediate, uncommodified, collective difference, they were also dependent upon the recognition and economic support of a system that produced a commodity from their performance.[32]

[32] Shank, p. 49.

The significance of music was not lost on Theodor Adorno, who wrote on the subject as much as the sociological and critical studies that I was previously exposed to. He was a composer and a pianist with a strong passion for classical music and a dislike of popular music (like jazz) and its commodification. He believed "popular music constitutes the dregs of musical history."[33] The objectification of the means of modern music consumption, the radio and the phonograph (and gramophone), fetishized music, isolated them from the whole. To Adorno, music was an intellectual exercise meant to be perceived in a concert hall and not segmented into individual segments as was necessary for the commercial and physical requirements of the modern technology.

> "The changes brought about by radio are more than coloristic; that they are changes of the symphony's own essential structure means not only that this structure is not adequately conveyed but that what does come out opposes the structure and constitutes a serious obstacle against its realization…The radio phenomenon produces an attitude in the listener which leads him to seek color and stimulating sounds."[34]

Commoditizing music did change it fundamentally, but "popular" music doesn't only exist as an object. The beauty of the live symphony can exist alongside its modern, physical objectification. The structure of the past was radically altered with the birth of jazz and later rock and roll, but Adorno's criticism seems misplaced. The rise of the

[33] Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, p. 29.
[34] Adorno (2002), p. 267.

honky-tonk and the diminishing popularity of the symphony hall are part of the collapsing of high and low culture that Adorno feared. Music, with a simpler structure and fewer rules, is giving voice to those without access to violins and conservatory education. By putting concerts in the streets and public spaces, this liberation is witnessed by others who can be engaged in a dialog with the musicians. The loosening of structure of popular music, reflected in the culture at large, gives us metaphors for improvising structure. What would someone who founded his definition of music in the hegemony of a Beethoven symphony make of thousands of sweaty bands playing toe to toe with hundreds of thousands of sweaty fans on the streets of Austin? Certainly there is a liberation in this interaction that must be appreciated.

Liveness is the fundamental element for me. Walter Benjamin said, "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[35] This is its *aura*, the part of live music that differentiates it from the recorded, the part that can inspire ecstasy or tears or violence. Despite its equivalence with the recording industry, modern music can still be argued to be live and improvised at its foundation. This is its *authentic* state. Its objectification, Benjamin says, reverses its function of ritual and magic, and turns it into politics. I argue that this state of live music can harness the ritual and use it politically.

What most of these texts are talking about is *power*. Who has the right to make noise? Who has the right to complain? Which musical scene is more important culturally

[35] Benjamin, p. 20.

than the other? Michel Foucault writes about power. He traces the roots of discipline to show how the mechanisms of power have moved from the public execution and the hidden dungeon to what he calls "Disciplinary Punishment" where the means are hidden in plain sight. His recalling of Bentham's Panopticon presages today's "surveillance state," where power is made visible and controls behavior by its (visual) signs. The power contained in the Capitol and the UT Tower certainly casts a long shadow over the various groups that want to gather socially and politically in Austin. "Power should be visible and unverifiable…Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so."[36] Certainly the threat of the PACE Team (Public Assembly Code Enforcement) lurking on the perimeters of Austin's outdoor venues is an image useful to the "long arm of the law," as they like to say in Texas.

[36] Foucault, p. 202.

Chapter One: Mapping the Landscape

> Rock'n'roll in Austin was marked by a contradiction at its very heart. It had grown out of the articulation of two opposing practices – folk-singing as the marker of youthful distance from mass culture and the honky-tonk commodification of an anti-modernist critique.[37]

> Now, we must learn to judge a society more by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, than by its statistics.[38]

Mapping the Austin musical landscape is the first essential step in theorizing about it. I will need to be selective, given its size, sprawling over the geographic city and decades of "scenes" that have fossilized below the present. This selectivity obviously will say a lot about our chosen discourse, so I will keep that close to the surface as we explore.

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[37] Shank, p. 49.
[38] Attali, p. 3.

The Armadillo

Our "ground zero" will be the Armadillo World Headquarters, long since demolished and replaced with an office complex, but the epicenter of a past that has served as a foundation of Austin's definition of itself. It was built as a WWII-era National Guard Armory (and later a variety of other incarnations[39]) that Eddie Wilson and his partners turned into a massive performance space and creative hub. In his blog, Wilson calls it "our armadillo playhouse," and of the community he cultivated, "We were a trade school and an army."[40] Shank says, "For many, the Armadillo will always be the spiritual home of Austin music."[41]

Wilson's creation was his (and his partners') reaction to the failure of another "alternative community center"/venue that had folded the same year the Armadillo opened, 1970. The Vulcan Gas Company failed in part because it didn't have a liquor license and had to make its money from ticket sales alone.[42] It tapped into the late-60's counter-culture movement but its appeal wasn't broad enough to tap into the larger mainstream audiences that were essential for filling up a large venue. Its acceptance of people of color, and other socially outcast groups, assured the more conservative fraternity crowd from the university stayed away. Menconi and Shank both blame the Vulcan's promotion of drug culture as the reason why their advertising was banned by

[39] It had also been a club for the deaf, a boxing arena, and for-hire music venue that had held record label showcases featuring Elvis Presley and Little Richard, among others. Menconi, p. 62.
[40] Wilson, "Armadillo WHQ 40 Years Later…" posted May 19, 2009. http://blog.threadgills.com/?tag=armadillo-world-headquarters
[41] Shank, p 8.
[42] Ibid, p. 49.

radio stations and the mainstream newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesman*. This restriction led to an explosion of unique posters and fliers throughout the city. Led by art director Gilbert Shelton (who would leave for the scene in San Francisco and gain national fame for his underground comic *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*) and Jim Franklin (who would later be one of the founding partners of the Armadillo and continue creating notoriously innovative poster art) this art, like the music it promoted, helped define the scene. Shank called it "a tradition that soon developed its own set of aesthetic criteria, offering a pictorial means of expressing difference."[43] Like sound itself, Vulcan's "papering" of Austin's cityscape was a way to claim the urban space for the counter-culture they were both hailing and defining. Franklin became, among other things, the art director for the Armadillo, continuing the tradition of the distinctive re-territorializing of Austin's city streets.

The Armadillo was only a mile from the site of the Vulcan, but it was across Town Lake in south Austin, ostensibly outside the urban boundary. Shank reminds us that this was the space of the honky-tonk – the boundary between urban and rural, the liminal world of the carnival. The traditional honky-tonk was "a magical modern marketplace of pleasure and possibility."[44] The mixing of cultures associated with a borderland would be its most culturally significant accomplishment.

One of their earliest shows was Texas native Willie Nelson. He had found great success as a songwriter in Nashville, but was ostracized from the country music

[43] Ibid, p. 50
[44] Ibid, p. 37.

community for his rebel streak, signified by his long hair and outspokenness for his love of marijuana. He felt the Nashville recording industry had turned his talents into a generic commodity that had sucked the emotion out of his songs. Desiring a community where he felt appreciated both as a performer and a citizen, he moved to Austin soon after the Armadillo opened. Ultimately he played at least a dozen shows there crossing the cultural divide by attracting both hippies and country music fans.

The popular label applied to this evolving hybrid character was the "cosmic cowboy," from the hit song "(I Just Want to Be a) Cosmic Cowboy" by Austin singer/songwriter (and Armadillo regular) Michael Murphey. As the style incorporated more musical elements of rock & roll, the genre was labeled "progressive country" or "outlaw country" or Jan Reid's tongue-in-cheek label, "redneck rock". The nation's first progressive country radio station, KOKE-FM was created here in 1972, and while the genre never drew mainstream ratings numbers, it did spread to other stations and helped define Austin to the world. Shank writes, "Rather than directly articulating an explicit set of beliefs, feelings or ideas, the expression of Texan identity was accomplished by means of this set of musical signifiers."[45] It gave music writers, both local and national, a useful hook to explain the cultural mixing that was going on in Austin. Menconi cites both KOKE management and Armadillo founders as actively "evangelizing" and pursuing "social engineering" to be a centripetal force to unite through music instead of divide. Armadillo founder/partner Mike Tolleson explained:

[45] Shank, p. 57.

> My philosophical attraction to music in the first place is that it transcends all national boundaries and social classes. It's a common denominator or thread that runs through masses of people, and it breaks down all those barriers. Music to me has always been a vital, essential component in one's life, so I was particularly eager to see music play a role in bringing these opposing segments of our society together, and to get credit for it.[46]

Attempts were made to capture and monetize the magic that musicians and audiences were creating inside, most notably some live albums from the likes of Frank Zappa and Freddie King. The management was eager to grow into a wider audience, to grow into a more global role:

> It was real apparent to me from the beginning that the future of the place was always to evolve into electronic media. You have a finite gross capacity when you can only seat 1600 people, so you can only book certain acts. There's only so many of 'em, and you can beat your brains out forever and never gain on that. Or you can go into radio and television, and never stop reaching the rest of the world…I'll admit that I felt incredibly ripped off when I first saw what they were doing with *Austin City Limits*.[47]

[46] Tolleson, quoted in Menconi, p. 91.
[47] Tolleson, quoted in Menconi, p. 126.

Austin City Limits

Booking Willie Nelson as its first guest for its 1975 pilot, *Austin City Limits* was an attempt to build on the success of the Armadillo. Even its name evokes the liminal space where honky-tonks thrive, further signified by the neon tubing style of the font on the logo. Produced and broadcast by a young PBS[48], it presented this modern honky-tonk within a context of *Masterpiece Theater* and Julia Child, lending a certain respectability and national relevance to this ostensibly regional genre.[49] Having access to America's domestic space was no small feat in a broadcasting environment that featured only four truly national broadcasters. Now in its 36th season, it is the longest running music program on television.[50]

Studio 6A at the University of Texas, where *ACL* is taped, provides us with a fascinating space to examine. A bronze plaque on the entrance of Communication Building B announces that the space is designated an official landmark by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Queuing audience members wrap themselves around the plaza outside the studio in a serpentine border that must be navigated by those leaving or entering classes. Elevators and bathrooms are shared with students. Located on a campus of academia, its presence also announces itself to the students and faculty as bass frequencies resonate through the building's structures when particularly loud bands are performing. A particularly aggressive soundcheck from the band Them Crooked Vultures

[48] PBS premiered in 1970.
[49] Much like it did for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.
[50] Looking Out My Backdoor," by Scott Newton, *Austin Chronicle*, Sept. 17, 2004. http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid:229312

in 2009 disturbed my class two floors below (ironically titled *Soundscapes*) even though the class was wearing ear-covering headphones for lab work. The sound was not merely sound, it was a movement, a literal quake that was impossible to ignore. (The particular bass player responsible for this impossible-to-ignore low frequency rumble was John Paul Jones, formerly of Led Zeppelin, whose bass-heavy sound was labeled "Hammer of the Gods."[51]) LaBelle reminds us that this distraction by unexpected sonic events is a metaphor for appreciating the *other*:

> Rather than strictly occupy the clear channel, the center of language, to engage the primary spatial event, listening imparts meaningful experiences through a fluctuation of focus that brings one in and around the mass and verve of so much sonic materiality, of *otherness*.[52]

Film sound theorist Michel Chion talks about the effect of "decentering" a film's primary focus: its dialogue. "[T]he use of varying sensory effects and the presence of certain sensations and rhythms create the feeling that the world is not reduced to the function of embodying dialogue."[53] Certainly, becoming aware of *Austin City Limits'* presence during a university lecture is a decentering experience, demanding a re-evaluation of what is central and what is peripheral.

Studio 6A becomes a hybrid space for both the concretization of the music in its recorded form (as a commodity) as well as an experiential space of a live performance

[51] The title of their 1985 biography by Stephen Davis.
[52] LaBelle, p. 184.
[53] Chion, in Altman, p. 110.

venue (as a practice). It is simultaneously authentic studio and authentic venue. The significance of Willie Nelson as the first and arguably the most prominent artist on *ACL* (tied with Lyle Lovett with 12 appearances) is wrapped up in what Willie represents. His narrative of having rejected the commodification of Nashville's recording industry for a simpler, more authentic connection to his audience through his live performances is written on his hippie-like ponytails; his anti rock star, zen-like demeanor; and his vocal promotion of marijuana. This character is the realm of the mythical trickster and coyote, whose purpose is to show us new perspectives and creative possibilities.

The other aspect of the Armadillo utilized by the TV show was the view of the Austin skyline, which was built as a fundamental part of the *ACL* set in 1982. The *Austin-American Statesman* recently said:

> It's not filmed outside, of course, although to this day some folks think it is. The iconic Austin skyline backdrop that surrounds the stage[…] is a jury-rigged construction of plywood and Christmas lights, like something a particularly ambitious high school theater group might construct.[54]

[54] "'Austin City Limits': The Lights Will Go Out in Studio 6A, but the Magic – and Music - Will Go On," John Davis, *Austin American Statesman*, Oct 2, 2010. http://www.austin360.com/music/austin-city-limits-the-lights-will-go-out-949667.html

Illustration 1: Austin songwriter Alejandro Escovedo and his band at a 2010 *ACL* broadcast. Photo from http://www.austindaze.com/2010/05/08/alejandro-escovedo-acl-taping.

This view is similar to the view one would have gotten if she or he had walked one block east from the location of the Armadillo to South Congress Avenue and looked north towards downtown. More significantly, if we are ultimately concerned with live music in public spaces, this simulacrum of the city puts the audience in some imagined outdoor space where noise problems are irrelevant. Furthermore, it places the audience (both in the studio and at home) in a complex position, viewing both the performer and

the signifiers of power – the Capitol and the UT Tower – while at the same time being viewed by them, at least symbolically. The bidirectionality of the subject-object relationship between artist and audience in a live setting is a significant difference between live and recorded music. As an audience member at a concert, one is both subject and object, both receiver and transmitter of energy and emotion. By placing the Capitol and Tower behind the stage, they are also part of this complex relationship. The "live" audience is simultaneously subject and object to both artist and power, with the skyline being the only constant throughout each episode. Even though the simulacrum is complete with generic, dark gray buildings and cranes, temporally it exists in a fixed place where growing condos and office buildings don't crowd the views of Austin's once-tallest structures as they do in reality.[55] Progress is a pose here, belied by the Dorian Gray properties of the vista. The overall effect is destabilizing to the position of the ageing viewer, placed in this timeless space that is simultaneously indoors and outdoors, ultimately elevating the Capitol to its prominent position as the illuminated focus at center stage, preserving an image of the past not unlike the view from 1980. The television audience is in a more stable subject position, not present to the performer, but the limited framing of the mise-en-scene creates an even more authoritative position for the skyline.

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[55] Both Austin and the state of Texas have zoning laws that require various "Capitol View Corridors" to be preserved. There are 30 such invisible lines radiating from the Capitol prohibiting construction of obstructing buildings. The city document that created the corridors says, "The Capitol is more than an architectural accomplishment; it represents accumulated legends and history that distinguish Texas from other states." http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/downtown/downloads/Capitol_View_Preservation_Study.pdf

Austin City Limits Fest

In 2002, a new iteration of the *Austin City Limits* brand had its inaugural show: the Austin City Limits Music Festival. Part of a conscious effort by producers to expand their brand and city planners hoping for an event to draw tourists to the city, it debuted to overflowing crowds. Located in the 350 acre public Zilker Park, it features three days of live music spread over multiple stages, attracting a high of 75,000 attendees in 2010. It programs a dynamic mix of local and regional favorites as well as nationally successful artists, much like the PBS show. As such, it is marketed to the national audience as much as the local. It is similar in size and scope to the Bonnarroo Music Festival in Manchester, Tennessee, which also began in 2002.

To call the ACL Fest a direct offshoot of the PBS show is not accurate, as its genesis lay in a meeting between the city and a local event promoter with its inspiration apparently from the Austin Aqua Festival (colloquially called "Aqua Fest") that ran along Town Lake from 1962 until 1998. More of a true community carnival, Aqua Fest over the years featured drag boat races, Grand Prix-style car races, motocross, the rodeo, the Air Force's Thunderbirds, fireworks, and of course, live music. It reads more like a celebration of man's relationship to loud sound.[56] Aqua Fest spent most of its life on the east side of town, around Festival Beach park on Town Lake. It is relevant that Town

[56] It also featured more pastoral pleasures like fishing contests, kite flying contests, and canoe races.

Lake was created from the Colorado River, partly to provide a cooling pond for the Holly Street Electric Plant - which was a major source of noise, air, and electro-magnetic pollution and catalyst of organized resistance for the politically ignored Latino community. In the 1970's, the noise and crowds from the drag boat races and music mobilized the eastside community into political action which resonated far into the future, and on issues far removed from sound alone. Local Latino activist Paul Hernandez formed a local chapter of the national Brown Berets for this cause and still has some impact at City Hall meetings on a wide range of issues.[57] Eastside community organization El Concilio traces its roots to the formation of the Brown Berets chapter in Austin.[58] This resistance led to arrests in 1978 (what the *Chronicle* called the "boat race riots") and subsequent lawsuits against the city and festival promoters. The Eastside community succeeded in pushing the festival further west, but had to live with the pollution from the electric plant for decades after. (It was decommissioned in 2007 after strong resistance by local environmental justice organization PODER and is in the process of being demolished in 2010.) The fact that sound was such a primary catalyst in organizing political community resistance speaks volumes about its place in our collective consciousness.It is interesting that Garret Keizer places "noise pollution" as an emerging discourse in the early 1970's, obviously linked to the "environmentalist

[57] "City Hall Hustle: Eastside Discordance", W. Dunbar, *Austin Chronicle*, Apr 16, 2010. http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/column?oid=oid:1016788.
[58] "Will Fernandez Bust Throw Eastside Détente into Turmoil?" L. Apple, *Austin Chronicle*, June 6, 2003. http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A162583.

mindset" of the era. That could be a contributing factor in the early success of the Austin Brown Berets: a national awareness framed by a potent metaphor.

A Brief Taxidermy of the Situation

It is relevant to make this semantic note involving the mascots of our objects of study. The grackle is part of the logo of the ACL Fest. Some of their online promotions involve "clicking on the grackle" to see content. Most who live in Austin are familiar with the aggressive "aaaack" of this local blackbird. Those who live within its audible range may be disturbed by its shrill voice, but the birds' ubiquity gives Austinites little recourse but to adapt and co-exist.

By contrast, consider of the sounds of the bat, specifically the Mexican free-tailed bat, listed as the "Official State Flying Mammal."[59] Their stunning mass exit at dusk from the Congress Avenue Bridge each summer evening is a major event for Austin tourists (and presumably, some residents), culminating in the annual Bat Fest featuring live bands and carnival attractions on the bridge, now entering its seventh year. Bats actually make a loud sound as well, but as many know, it climbs into the ultrasonic frequency range above what humans can perceive. If you observe young children watching the bats, they will sometimes cover their ears, illuminating the fact that their pristine hearing apparatus is considerably more sensitive to these parts of the frequency spectrum than adults'. The take-away from this is that not every person perceives sound the same way. Interestingly,

[59] http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ref/abouttx/symbols.html

the 1.5 million bats moved underneath the bridge when reconstruction was completed in 1980 and were an unintended consequence of the improving of the city's infrastructure. They were initially feared and resisted, yet through a semantic changing of perception, they were turned into an economic benefit and public pride.[60]

Finally, let us consider the curious, silent armadillo. Menconi traces his cultural genesis in Austin to poster artist Jim Franklin, before the namesake venue was created. Franklin explains:

> Armadillos and hippies are somewhat alike, 'cause they're maligned and picked on. Armadillos like to sleep all day and roam at night. They share their holes with others. People think they're smelly and ugly and they keep their noses in the grass. They're paranoid. But they've got one characteristic that nobody can knock: they SURVIVE like a sonuvabitch.[61]

The Austin Independent Business Alliance (AIBA), formed in 2002, has adopted the armadillo as part of its logo, presumably more for the associations with Austin's storied past than for Franklin's reasoning above.

In these three cultural mascots, we have a multitude of signs, but for our purposes we focus on their respective sonic personas: the aggressively noisy, the secretly noisy, and the stoic, adaptive, quiet kind. Co-opted as signs signifying the Austin public character, they amplify and clarify who the players are in our conflicts over noise. The

[60] http://www.batcon.org/index.php/get-involved/visit-a-bat-location/congress-avenue-bridge/subcategory.html?layout=subcategory
[61] Menconi, p. 67.

grackle as the choice for signifying the ACL Fest is a statement of warning to the inaudible bats and armadillos of the neighborhoods surrounding Zilker Park.

South by Southwest

No discussion of Austin music would be complete without a mention of the South by Southwest music festival (SXSW). It is perhaps the most globally recognized cultural brand of the city, or at least a close second to *Austin City Limits*. Created in 1987 as a weekend of live music performances and panel discussions, it has grown into a massive ten-day behemoth now incorporating film and interactive media, drawing nearly 2000 bands in 2010.[62]

To understand the genesis of the festival, we must look at the mindset in Austin in the 1980's. The Texas Music Association was a trade organization formed in Dallas in 1981. The Austin chapter was started by Ernie Gammage who was a UT finance graduate and lead singer in numerous cover bands. Gammage actively courted the Austin Chamber of Commerce to partner up in promoting live music as an attraction for tourists and convention planners. His main resource was a master's thesis from a student at the University of Texas' Regional and Community Planning program called, "The Impact of the Music Entertainment Industry of Austin, Texas." The author, Phyllis Krantzman, had mailed out questionnaires to local musicians, mostly from the American Federation of

[62] From a SXSW promotional video, http://www.youtube.com/sxsw#p/c/553F59F40947CC9B/2/YSp1MQaqiSg.

Musicians, creating an object of study that skewed towards older, more conservative veterans of the progressive country scene that were raising families and participating in more stable projects than most of the younger musicians.[63] Gammage, with this thesis in hand, attracted the attention of David Lord, the head of the Austin Visitors and Convention Bureau, who was also a member of the Chamber of Commerce. Shank says Lord, "recognized that any set of symbolic values held so dear by a local population could form the basis for a set of businesses devoted to the production and sale of commodified representations of that identity."[64] In an article in the *Austin Business Review* in 1985, Lord announced his vision of using live music as a lure of a much broader purpose than simply conventioneers:

> Music as a business fits in with several goals of the Chamber.[…] It fosters economic growth by, among other things, promoting entrepreneurship and the formation of a new business as well as attracting conventions and tourists to the Austin area. It promotes a superior *quality of life* for all Austin citizens by encouraging artistic and cultural development. […] Seen as an industry, the music business is just about perfect.[65]

By yoking itself to the music scene and the "quality of life," the Chamber was framing the discourse within its own pro-development mindset and co-opting the language of the

[63] Shank, p. 199.
[64] Ibid, p. 200 (emphasis added).
[65] David Lord, "The Business of Local Music on High Note," *Austin Business Journal,* Jan 6, 1985. Emphasis original.

neighborhood activists that were resisting such growth. A 1987 *Chronicle* piece identified "quality of life" as a "catch phrase for environmental protection, cultural dynamism, neighborhood integrity, and economic stability."[66] By framing the creative practice of making music within an industrial model, the resistance to growth that was gaining in Austin at the time was partially subverted, wrapped in fantasies of a still-relevant MTV.

In fact, it should be noted, that when Austin had its first big moment on MTV, an hour long episode of *The Cutting Edge* in 1985, the show open (as well as the interstitial video leading to commercials) featured a montage of a working cranes high above the existing skyline.[67] These are dizzying shots framed as POV from the cranes' scaffolding, placing the audience as subject within the structure of urban expansion. The houses and buildings down on the ground seem small and inconsequential. Popular Austin musician Joe "King" Carrasco bemoans the growth of his city, "They come here because of the scene, but then they want to take away the uniqueness"[68] I remember watching this episode in my freshman dorm in Tallahassee, Florida, surprised at how far this vibrant, alternative music scene was from my college town and my impression of Texan rock & roll (country influenced). Austin seemed a unique island of creative energy, *in* Texas, but not *of* it.

The Chamber created the Austin Music Advisory Committee in 1984, which filed a report recommending an annual, nationally recognized event targeting music industry

[66] Jim Shahin, "Remember Quality of Life?" *Austin Chronicle*, March 13, 1987.
[67] *The Cutting Edge*, 1985, MTV, airdate unknown. Viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itWEUa-CoqU
[68] Ibid. Viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrQqYY6bKuE&p=4C35843E2CF72FA0

types, similar to New York City's successful New Music Seminar. When the NMS organizers passed, the Chamber courted a couple of local promoters who in turn convinced the *Chronicle's* management to cooperate in creating the event. This was the genesis of SXSW.

Louis Black and Nick Barbaro are editor and publisher, respectively, of the *Chronicle* from its inception through the present. Both were classmates at UT in the RTF department and wrote for *The Daily Texan*; both made the roadtrip to the Sex Pistols' San Antonio show; both were at the near riot at Raul's in 1978; Barbaro was one of the six arrested that night. In their prototype issue from 1981, in a "Letter from the Publishers," Barbaro and co-publisher Joe Dishner wrote, "Our editorial stance can be summed up as follows: entertainment reflects modern culture."[69] It is interesting to see their evolution from audience members to what they called an "advocacy position," acting as promoters for the scene. Soon the desires of the paper itself - for Austin to have a strong cultural scene with national significance - would seem to replace the simple motivations of being a fan. Together with a couple of local promoters, Black and Barbaro created SXSW, debuting on March 14, 1987. This is the week of spring break at UT and many schools nationwide, the ultimate modern celebration of the spring carnival.

SXSW is now a massive event that takes over the city in ways not comparable to any centralized festival like the Austin City Limits Fest. It is a decentralized presentation of live music in venues both traditional and makeshift. Even the claims of nearly 2000 bands represent only the official showcases organized by SXSW, undercounting the

[69] As quoted by Shank.

actual, lived festival as it plays out on Austin's streets. To quantify this would be pointless - it must be witnessed at the street level to appreciate the carnivalesque chaos that flows through downtown and much of the rest of the city. Unsanctioned performances play out in warehouses, alleys, and flat-bed trucks. Even official "showcase" performances take place in non-traditional venues, redefining the sacred space of the Central Presbyterian Church or the campy cabaret of Esther's Follies. The city radiates pure potential energy, the senses of the participant become hyper-aware by all the stimulation and possibilities. The subject-object relationship, already problematized by the give-and-take of live music in general, further dissolves as the boundary between performer and audience falls. Both artist and spectator must improvise to navigate and function in such a dynamic situation. Its original intent may have been to draw visitors to the city, and to create the impression of Austin as a modern beacon of the culture industry, but SXSW defies such easy definitions. Certainly, the impression from the air-conditioned panel discussions at the Convention Center may be one of order and a numbing desire to transform one's art from passion to commodity; outside on the public streets however, it sounds, looks, smells, tastes, and feels like anarchy and carnival. It is still a commodified experience, where admission badges can exceed $1000 for the entire festival, but it is an experience that defines the city as Mardi Gras does for New Orleans. On the streets, VIP badge holders rub shoulders with those partaking in the free cultural experience. As a participant, one feels more connected to the public body within this de-centered space than at any other space in Austin. It is exhilarating.

Live Music Capital of the World

In 1991 the Austin city council passed a resolution proclaiming itself the "Live Music Capital of the World." It is a reification of the city's history and a commitment to creating an environment in which performed music can thrive. The city's website claims that "city staff research found that Austin had more live music venues per capita" than any other "music hotbed."[70] If SXSW has taught us anything, it's that "music venue" is a problematic term. The space where music is performed can be anywhere where a group can gather. Austin channels money to a few non-traditional venues that are worth a brief mention.

An airport is a significant statement about a city. It is a transitional space where first impressions are created that will frame an entire visit to a new city. One of the most striking features of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport is its commitment to both local businesses and local bands. There is a conscious selection of Austin concessions present, with no Starbucks or McDonalds anywhere. Of the 15 food and drink vendors, only the pretzels (Auntie Anne's) and the Chinese food (Wok & Roll) are not based in Austin.

On the "secure side"[71] of the concourse, an elevated stage sits next to Ray Benson's Roadhouse.[72] Made of aluminum siding and visible wood framing, the stage is a polished simulacrum of a Texas honky-tonk, placed incongruously in the center of the

[70] http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/music/default.htm
[71] http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/austinairport/musicartstours.htm
[72] An interesting mix of signifiers, considering Benson is a local legend known for Asleep at the Wheel, his band of 40 years. Combining "asleep at the wheel" with a "roadhouse" seems like questionable advice for arriving tourists.

modern glass and steel concourse. Large metal letters are attached to the stage proclaiming the city's live music slogan to travelers. As I mentioned, this is the first place I was aware of this designation (although the stage and signage has been improved since 2002.) Other concessions in the airport also sponsor music, sometimes on makeshift stages, including the Waterloo Records and Austin City Limits stores. All of these performances are part of the program *Music in the Air* that is coordinated by the city and promoted on its website. Surprisingly, the city doesn't contribute any money to the operation. All the funding for the artists comes from the concessionaires (Delaware North Hospitality Management Company and Pepsi) and is coordinated by city employee Nancy Coplin. That the city is able to reap the semiotic benefits of this without actually paying the bands is a conflicting message about its actual commitment to live music. Certainly the music is a contributing factor to Austin being named the "Best Airport in North America" by the Airport Councils International in 2009, based on passenger surveys.[73]

By 2011, Coplin says, there will be five available stages for *Music in the Air*. This includes the January 2011 opening of longtime Austin venue the Saxon Pub on the concourse.[74] The Saxon ethos is markedly distinct from the traditional rowdy honky-tonk vibe, despite its focus on country-flavored Americana music. The Saxon is a *listening* room, where talkative audience members are hushed and the focus is on the song, not the

[73] ACI Airport Service Quality Awards 2009.
http://www.airports.org/cda/aci_common/display/main/aci_content07_c.jsp?zn=aci&cp=1-7-46%5E35015_666_2.
[74] "Off the Record," Austin Powell, *Austin Chronicle*, Feb 12, 2010.
http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/column?oid=oid:960937.

social party. It will be interesting to see how the structure of the airport space affects the primacy of the performer. The audience in this case is not self-selecting, and since much of the foot traffic is en route to somewhere else, music has the potential to become just another distraction, a commodity with little value. In the realm of subject-object relations, the traveler is generally the subject of their own narrative, rendering the performer as an object, diminishing their worth. Despite my appreciation for it, I have never stayed for more than a song.

Live from the Plaza is a performance that takes place many Fridays throughout the year, on a stage in front of City Hall. Built in 2004, City Hall incorporates built-in limestone bleacher-type seating that overlooks the plaza and stone stage below, where the free lunchtime concerts are open to the public. Looking at a list of performers over the years, they are certainly more multi-cultural than the generally white Anglo performers common at *Music in the Air*, *ACL* and at the ACL Fest. These concerts are broadcast by the city's own public cable Channel 6 and archived for viewing on their website. Creating the space from limestone gives it an aura of permanence, a commitment by the city.

Chapter Two: A Collision of Compatible Uses

Music is prophecy. Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. For this reason musicians, even when officially recognized, are dangerous, disturbing, and subversive; for this reason it is impossible to separate their history from that of repression and surveillance.[75]

Distraction may act as a productive model for recognizing all that surrounds the primary event of sound – to suddenly hear what is usually out of earshot.[…] Distraction may in the end function as means for undoing the lines of scripted space, loosening our sense for performing within a given structure, and according to certain expectations; to exceed or to fall

[75] Attali, p. 11.

> short of the assumed goal. To be distracted is potentially to be more human.[76]

Partially through the city's efforts, the *promise* of Austin has become a siren-song to musicians everywhere. They are attracted by the multitude of venues and the commitment professed by the city. Someone familiar with Austin only through its most widely promoted cultural events (SXSW, ACL Fest, the mise-en-scene outdoor simulacrum from the *ACL* broadcast) would furthermore believe that music at outdoor, public spaces is part of the fabric of the city.[77] I hope that I have shown, to some degree, that this is accurate: a large amount of live music occurs here in public space and in open space, often both. This embracing of music, obviously, isn't the only reason someone would move here, and there are those who resent the uncontainability of sound as it seeps through the porous borders of their private space. R. Murray Schafer poetically frames sound as "touching at a distance,"[78] which encapsulates what is both desired and contested by those who are concerned with the audible.

The city government's relationship to the music scene is complex and dynamic. The reification of its commitment in the self-designated "Live Music Capital" label

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[76] LaBelle, p. 184.

[77] David Nelson, an acoustic engineer in Austin whom I will introduce shortly, claimed at a recent lecture that he genuinely believed *ACL* was shot from some hilltop overlooking the city before he moved here. I strongly doubt he is the only one.

[78] Schafer, p. 11. This is a wonderfully transcendent perspective since it is also a great description of the bioacoustic process where the waves of pressure that *are* sound *physically* press on the eardrum to transduce the energy to a form understood by the inner ear.

requires support of both resources and legislation. In a 2001 study done by the city called "The Role of Music in the Austin Economy" they explain:

> [Q]uality of life considerations are assuming an increasing role in corporate expansion and relocation decisions – since many firms can be located virtually anywhere, quality of life and its impact on the company's ability to attract and maintain the best possible labor force is a vital consideration. As a result, the arts have become a critical element in overall economic development planning, and are increasingly touted by those seeking to recruit and retain firms in Austin. [79]

Here we see the nexus of the music scene and economic desires of the city. Shank historicizes Austin's motivations for a strong cultural scene by noting that the city was never a strong manufacturing center, not rich in farmland, nor did it contain any great deposits of Texas oil. Its economic pillars have been the State Capital and the University of Texas, both built on a transient population and creating a "service economy oriented to the after-hours desires and the leisure needs of politicians and students."[80] The local business community has traditionally spent its resources encouraging projects to make the city more desirable to conventioneers and tourists. At some point this motivation has grown to include the desire to wooing modern high tech, knowledge industry firms. This has been a gradual process, but one single example of this desire is the expansion of the

[79] "The Role of Music in the Austin Economy" http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/downloads/music_economy2001.pdf
[80] Shank, p. 8.

SXSW festival to include an "interactive" component in 1994 (as well as a film component that same year.) Keep in mind that the early 90's was when our economic and political world-view began evolving to incorporate the globally connected structure of the World Wide Web.

The City Council has spent years trying to quantify the impact of the music and greater culture industries in a Powerpoint-framed rhetoric that defines much civic discourse. In seeking some academic theory to hang their quantified cultural support on, the city has turned to the work of Richard Florida, an urban studies professor and best-selling author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*. His work is quoted in "The Role of Music in the Austin Economy" from 2001 and the subsequent "The Role of the Cultural Sector in the Local Economy: 2005 Update".[81] In his research, Florida links the luring of creative types necessary to construct a successful knowledge economy with his "3T's index," comprising a numerical value for technology, talent, and tolerance.[82] His basic thesis is that a city must cultivate an environment attractive to the "creative class" in order to compose the infrastructure needed to woo modern, global, high-tech companies. As a city highlighted often in the entire Creative Class series (*The Rise* was followed by *Cities and the Creative Class*, *The Flight of the Creative Class*, and *Who's your City?*) Austin's hailing of the convention/tourism market dovetailed nicely with the foundation needed to lure the creatives as defined by Florida.

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[81] Found at http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/telecom/musicstudy.htm and http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/culturalplan/downloads/TXP_Cultural_Sector.pdf respectively.
[82] "Creativity Index" on Florida's website, http://www.creativeclass.com/creative_class/2009/04/09/creativity-index/.

Of course, to succeed at making the city desirable to a group that Florida defines as a third of our country's population, a city must be prepared for the inevitable effects of such growth. The Austin population has soared from roughly 465,000 in 1990; 656,000 in 2000; to 786,000 in 2010.[83] It seems inevitable that the growth of residents and the commitment to a vibrant music scene would clash in the realm of noise complaints. This is representative of the larger resistance to growth that Austin is facing.

In his scholarly examination of the "Keep Austin Weird" movement, Joshua Long's *Weird City* documents Austin's historical resistance to growth and outside influence. The lack of national chains at the airport, a microcosm of the city as a whole, is a great example of this ethos. He claims, "Austin politics for years have been dominated by a contentious and somewhat simplistic split between 'environmentalists' and 'developers'".[84] Taking on the Creative Class rhetoric directly, he warns that cities in competition to attract the "mobility of capital," are creating a homogenized landscape devoid of local character.[85] The gentrification that Florida promotes erases historical uniqueness and displaces residents, by definition in less affluent parts of town. The "Keep Austin Weird" movement is essentially a reification of the desire for resistance against growth, in direct conflict with the motivations of Professor Florida and the City Council. Interestingly, while the independent creator of the original bumper sticker sees

[83] U.S. Census. http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?-ds_name=PEP_2008_EST&-mt_name=PEP_2008_EST_GCTT1R_ST9S&-geo_id=04000US48&-format=ST-9&-tree_id=806&-context=gct. 2010 Estimates are from http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/demographics/.
[84] Long, p. 33.
[85] Ibid, p. 167.

his catch-phrase as a "small attempt to counter Austin's descent into rampant commercialism and over-development,"[86] local independent businesses like Waterloo Records and Book People book store have co-opted the slogan for their own (commercial) purposes. Its prominent display at the airport stores, for example - on shirts, bags and stickers - sends a conflicted message, hailing potential residents while simultaneously discouraging growth.

R. Murray Schafer traces the earliest by-laws pertaining to noise to Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., limiting the times allowing wheeled vehicles within the city of Rome. Karin Bijsterveld, in historicizing noise abatement laws, traces the movement to the chaos created by motorized cars, and efforts to form structures to control it:

> [T]rying to control people's behaviour, especially on the road, became precisely the rhetorical heart of the campaigns that followed the first essays on noise, a result of the enduring conceptualization of city noise as a problem caused by disruptive and uncivilized behaviour.[87]

Thus, the structuring aspects of modernization (carving roads and patterns of order through the pre-existing wilderness) also functioned as a way to create *peace* (both auditory and as a negation of conflict) for the residents of a city. She continues, "This fostered economic wellbeing and safety, and at the same time created rhythm out of

[86] http://keepaustinweird.com.
[87] Bijsterveld, 2003, p. 172.

chaos, thus partially reasserting human control over events."[88] This desire to control the growing public dove-tails nicely with Foucault historicizing the mechanisms of power and discipline:

> Discipline…arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions…It must also master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity; it must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it…anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions.[89]

This correlation between the growing chaos of the public streets and the authority's desire to keep the peace furthers the association between modernization and the control of noise.

In reality, the tools and elements of modernization are often the noisiest instruments of the modern soundscape. To many Austin residents, indeed to people everywhere, the loudest sounds in their domestic space would be mechanical noise. This is the noise of trains, planes, and construction machinery. These are the sounds of progress and commerce, not culture; sounds of the powerful, not the individual. They are the sounds of domination over one's habitat; the primacy of the church bells; the *vox dei*.

[88] Ibid, p. 181.
[89] Foucault, p. 219.

These are harder for the citizen to contest because they are ubiquitous and a priori. And while the Austin noise ordinance does place some general limits on sound of all types, its dominant focus is decidedly on amplified sound. The chapter name in the city's code alone shows this bias: "Noise and Amplified Sound."[90] The mechanism for enforcing noise is generally the Public Assembly Code Enforcement (P.A.C.E.) officers, whose title defines them as concerned with public gatherings, not industrial worksites or transportation.

The mechanical sound that has entered our general public discourse in the past couple of decades is the suburban leaf blower, cursed with a high-pitch dynamic whining and placed into the presumed tranquility of our domestic space. The resistance against this single instrument has succeeded in some communities and is actively being pursued in many others. It is an interesting front in the noise wars, since the parties involved seem so easily defined on the surface, and the object of concern is single, identifiable instrument of noise. It plays out on local news media nationwide, often as a battle between concerned, entitled suburbanites and the low-wage, ethnically "other" lawn-maintenance workers. Obviously it is much more complicated than this simple binary would suggest, since the workers are hired by the complainants' own neighbors who are complicit in the noise making with their checkbooks. Semiotically, the blower is a specific object that can unambiguously be restricted or banned with municipal laws. The lawn is cultivated as a statement of our sense of aesthetics, a public marking of our

[90] Chapter 9-2 of *The Code of the City of Austin Texas*, http://www.amlegal.com/nxt/gateway.dll/Texas/austin/thecodeofthecityofaustintexas?f=templates$fn=default.htm$3.0$vid=amlegal:austin_tx$anc=

private space. The practice of leaf blowing is a reminder of our disconnect from our land, our labor, and our own responsibilities.. The Hispanic lawn crew is a visual, audible, even olfactory reminder of our divisions of class and our separation from our neighbors.

The Decibel

A municipal noise ordinance is by definition an attempt to quantify a disagreement over an evanescent phenomenon. Laws cannot address the invisible, intangible reality of sound waves without some way of concretizing them as data points. This both simplifies and diminishes our discussion about sound. It *can* be defined as a set of mathematical data points to be valued and limited, but to do so is to miss the bigger picture.

Garrison Keizer traces the popular adoption of the decibel and the invention of the audiometer to the 1920's and Bell Telephone Labs. He quotes a 1930's Saturday Evening Post as declaring, "the fight against wasteful racket is out of the hands of cranks and theorists, and is being directed by trained technical minds."[91] The problem is that the science is not simple arithmetic. A decibel (dB) is a logarithm – a way of comparing dynamic values over time. It is not a absolute value like an inch or a gram. When used with sound, a dB is an average of Sound Pressure Levels which, over time, can change drastically, even for something as common as speech. Even decibels of sound have different ways of calculating the averages. There are different "flavors" of dB's, using

[91] Keizer, p. 116.

various suffix letters to represent different reference levels. All this variability makes it nearly impossible to discuss the science of sound with anyone but a trained engineer.

At a recent presentation at the UT Engineering School[92], acoustic engineer David Nelson discussed the current state of the Austin noise ordinance. He framed the battle over noise in public space a "collision of compatible uses." His interpretation of "noise" is one of subjectivity: it is "sound" at the source and "noise" at the receptor. (He said he is careful to choose his words depending on who is paying his salary.) Austin's noise ordinance, while he criticized it for being cobbled together from a layers of consultants over the years, is unique in that it focuses on "enforcement and participation," meaning it is written to allow venues to check their own sound – it encourages self-enforcement. It mandates the measurements be made using dB using a "slow response" which provides a running average, which gives a more stable response and is available on cheap sound meters available at Radio Shack. Nelson believes this is unique to Austin's code.

The other condition placed on the measurement is that the dB's are "A-weighted," otherwise written as dBA. Since sound levels can vary for different frequencies (humans hear generally from 20-20,000 Hertz) some consideration has to be made how to count and average them into a single value within a complex sound. While dBA is used by most noise ordinances and OSHA,[93] it emphasizes the higher frequencies, assigning less importance to low frequencies. This biased number may work well for many industrial

[92] "There's Music in the Air," Oct. 15, 2010, Engineering Building 4.120, University of Texas.
[93] "What is a Decibel?" Joshua Leasure. http://austinnoise.org/2009/08/22/what-is-a-decibel/

applications, but it fails under the weight of bass-heavy rock & roll. The long wavelengths of low frequencies penetrate buildings easier than high ones and their relatively slow vibrations are more likely to "rattle the china."[94] In simple terms, the specific types of decibels used in Austin's code don't accurately reflect the effect of sound on the receiver – a sound could be within the set limits but still a significant annoyance to the unintended audience. I'm reminded here of my classroom experience with the *ACL* soundcheck. Add to this the dynamic behavior of sound waves in different temperatures, and through different physical landscapes and materials, it becomes impossible to predict the result of a traveling wave on any given target, except at the individual receiver itself.

Nelson and the engineers present fully understood that the public does not understand the science involved. A good public education in sound would go a long way helping all the players in this drama communicate with each other. The fact that the city doesn't pay to have a noise control engineer on staff is a shortcoming that could be fixed. Building with masonry is a great line of defense against intruding sound; glass provides little protection. Sound insulation requires special considerations which will affect the price and may limit design options, especially considering the "open" designs of many modern condominiums. Many variables go into the architectural decisions a developer makes, but acoustic considerations should be a significant concern, along with price, aesthetics and safety. Mostly, the solution most unanimously encouraged by the engineers is "good community relations." Venues must find ways to engage with their

[94] Nelson's phrase and rich with symbolism of an upper class complainant.

neighbors, and be willing to meet face to face. Granted, the 600-foot radius set by the Austin noise ordinance incorporates a lot of neighbors, but ultimately, even the scientists understand the value of social interaction.

Obviously, our questions shouldn't expect to be answered solely in the realm of science. Still, it is an relevant perspective on a complex problem that requires such lateral thinking, especially since this is the way the discourse is presented within the city code itself. Certainly Attali would agree that this discussion of noise disputes is an echo of the definition of music itself: it *can* be explained in a quantifiable frame, but such mathematical logic doesn't really describe what happens culturally, socially, emotionally. Keizer appears of two minds when considering the acoustics experts. He appears wary of their personal motivations to serve their client: "Winning a noise dispute, or determining the acoustic character of a community 'under development,' belonged to that party with the greatest means to buy expertise."[95] On the next page however, he places the scientific in a place that seems more nuanced: "If science has often been used to wrest credibility from the human ear, it might also be used to corroborate the ear's witness."[96]

What the ordinance does succeed in is staking a presence in the invisible space around our venues. It gives body or form to the evanescence of the audible. It creates an image in our minds of the fleeting sound made tangible and punishable. Foucault, describing Bentham's Panopticon explains, "Power should be visible and unverifiable:[…] the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any

[95] Keizer, p. 116.
[96] Ibid, p. 117.

moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so." The collective ears of the neighbors may be the object of concern for the musicians and club owners, but the threat of penalization from the city – embodied by the specter of officers with their magical, modern decibel meters – is the signifier that they respond to.

Drawing a Crowd

> There is a notable gap between the conceptualized, *planned* city and the experienced, *lived* city. The fate of urban landscapes lies somewhere in this gap.[97]

Let's take the most salient point from the engineers and unpack it. They conclude that the solution is in "good community relations" - knowing your neighbor. In a city growing as fast as Austin is, the steady flow of "others" creates stress on the population. To Barry Shank, Joshua Long and David Menconi, "authenticity" and "sense of place" are important concepts to residents here. Rapid growth threatens what they love about Austin, so this fear gets projected onto those who are moving in. Menconi identifies "Don't Houstonize Austin" as a "rallying cry" among locals in the 1980's.[98] Long, examining our very recent condo building boom and explores the local meme,

[97] Long, p. 68.
[98] Menconi, p. 41.

"Californication."[99] While the potent neologism goes back at least to the 1970's[100], its use in contemporary Austin encapsulates local resistance to the relatively wealthy, high-tech workers being wooed by the city. The modern glass and steel condos that have crowded out the Capitol and UT Tower in the skyline are an additional target for those uncomfortable with such change. Such growth and stress is a genuine economic and cultural concern, with the potential to crowd out other elements that define Austin to some. And while the residential development around areas once considered commercial/entertainment districts does create a situation where noise becomes a primary focus of this socio-political contestation, to fix a label to those complaining about the noise is to diminish and obscure the problem.

Downtown is now the arena where new residents may choose to call home – and where the identity of the city as many see it – the Live Music Capitol of the World - is amplified and reverberated off the very walls that create *spaces* from a single open *space*. To reclaim the social and cultural freedom of this single open space, the only solution is to create dialog, to listen as we speak, treat everyone as a relevant voice in the discussion, even those not audible over the din of the city. Karin Bijsterveld says "social equality is the starting point"[101] for any conversation about noise disputes.

This is a practice well known to musicians. To simply play one's own music isn't sufficient in a band. One must exercise the ability to play and listen simultaneously – the successful result is a form of negotiation. Adjustments are made in real time as tempos

[99] Long, p. 85.
[100] http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/08/arts/music/08choi.html
[101] quoted in Keizer, p. 134.

shift and others contribute their voices to the collective. A city is like a song in that it is composed by a number of structuring elements, but it adapts as the instruments are added and it becomes a living practice. Heraclitus said "you can never step into the same river twice," like a song will never be played live exactly the same way twice, and a place is changing as time flows through it. To navigate the dynamic nature of a space, one must understand both the structures and spontaneous elements that continuously create it. Shank helps us connect the promise of the social sphere – of politics itself – with the intangible potential of the song:

> In the inexpressible nature of collective musical pleasure can be found an implicit promise of something more, a potential that exceeds the competitive struggle for individual gain.[102]

[102] Shank, p. 251.

Conclusion: Listening

As I conclude this paper, the final recording of *Austin City Limits* in its original home in Studio 6A has happened. Lyle Lovett, who played his earliest shows in Austin at the "open mic night" at the Cactus Café at UT, was the featured guest. Starting in 2011 it will move to the W Hotel complex downtown and into a new space awkwardly named *Austin City Limits Live at the Moody Theater*. Willie Nelson will be the first artist for the 2011 season on PBS, its 37th year on the air. The new venue will allow a bigger audience and the technical infrastructure to hide much of the high definition production apparatus. Moving to such a modern, high-end facility speaks volumes about the changing character of the show and the city. The W is a private space of wealth and therefore exclusivity. It is a global brand renting temporary private residence. It is a monument to impermanence that will by incorporated into the real skyline that may conceivably be rendered as a simulacrum on the new stage. The original humble skyline backdrop is not making the trip downtown, but will stay in 6A where producers plan have created a web series, *ACL Presents: Satellite Sets*, featuring younger, up-and-coming artists.

Austin has a rich cultural history created by its unique position as an independent space within the independent state of Texas. This independence is manifested in a strong live music scene created by both the citizens of the city and the collective structures they

invent – from the Armadillo to the *Austin Chronicle* to the City Council. As the city's cultural richness becomes part of its global identity, people become attracted to the promise of a creative space and move here to participate. This growth is met head-on by the echoes of the live music bouncing off the surfaces of the urban space, creating conflict in the form of noise disputes. The stress of modernization is not unique to Austin; in fact many cities may look to us to as a model for a way forward, given our commitment to both art and community. It is this focus on "sense of place" that makes our conflict so amplified and important. In a world where increasingly global desires can wipe out the uniqueness of a place, this fight to retain that which makes Austin unique will resonate with countless other places.

There is no blanket solution to such a complex problem. Creating this social fabric is a messy, antagonistic endeavor. The urban creation is fraught and the structures we invent to attenuate civic discord are often as imperfect as the individuals that demand them. The current discourse of framing it as an engineering problem limits the possible ways of thinking about it, but it is an important step towards a solution. More important is a respect for both one's neighbor and sense of place.

Music has a spontaneity and unmediated emotional connection that, arguably, make it unique in the world of culture. It is certainly part of the cultural DNA of Austin., both a product of and a reason for the creative ethos that defines this city. Builders and residents in neighborhoods close to existing venues need to respect this art form, in that it is part of what draws them here. It needs to be made clear to those parties that this is part

of the landscape they will be inhabiting, like coyotes in the Hill Country or flooding in Miami.

Musicians and venue owners must respect the rights of their fellow citizens. Venues, like the residences around them, must spend the extra money to isolate their sound from that on the outside. Masonry walls, double-paned windows, and dense insulation are only some of the most obvious strategies for containing a particular sonic environment. Perhaps our desire for outdoor, amplified music needs to be rethought, as the open air allows the sound waves to propagate far and wide. *Austin City Limits* created a myth of an unimpeded urban space that may be impractical as we adapt to our swelling population.

The city utilizes tremendous resources for its biannual festivals – SXSW and ACL – it is time to commit now to give live music the *consistent* support truly needed to be its capital. A more concerted effort, in the form of economic incentives for effective building materials, would show a greater commitment to this serious issue. A full-time acoustic engineer, easy public access to information, and forums for dialogue (both online and in person) all would contribute to a more involved and educated public; being more *pro*active than *re*active. We have planted the seeds and now we must continue to cultivate our garden.

The solution calls out for a strong commitment to listening, to encourage the social aspects of the political, where everyone has an equal voice in the discussion. Like a musical performance, the space of the city is a living collective that evolves and negotiates its way through time.

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